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GIGA Research Programme:
Violence, Power and Security

The Culture of Fear and Control in Costa Rica (II): The Talk of Crime and Social Changes

Sebastian Huhn

No 108 **September 2009**

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The Culture of Fear and Control in Costa Rica (II): The Talk of Crime and Social Changes

Abstract

The Costa Rican talk of crime is fundamentally based on the assumption that a formerly explicitly nonviolent nation has been transformed into a battleground for social violence—that is, on the belief that an alarming "crime wave" is occurring today while there was no crime at all in the past. On the basis of this assumption, the fear of crime and the call for zero tolerance and drastic law enforcement actions have been increasing. In this paper I discuss the Costa Rican talk of crime from a historical perspective to demonstrate that crime has always been a topic that has generated pervasive feelings of insecurity and social pessimism. I argue that social changes in Costa Rican society and the paradigmatic shift in economic and social-welfare politics since the 1980s have been essential in the transformation of the talk of crime. As part of this transformation, the politicization of crime since the 1990s has been one of the most powerful changes in the dominant discourse.

Keywords: Costa Rica, violence, crime, social order, public discourse, social change

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Zusammenfassung

Kultur der Angst und Kontrolle in Costa Rica (II):
Der Diskurs über Gewalt und sozialer Wandel

Der costaricanische öffentliche Diskurs über Gewalt und Kriminalität stützt sich vor allem auf die Prämisse, dass sich die ehemals gewaltlose Nation in ein Schlachtfeld alltäglicher Gewalt verwandelt hat, das heißt, dass heute in Costa Rica eine Besorgnis erregende „Welle der Gewalt“ zu beobachten ist, während es in der Vergangenheit quasi keine Kriminalität gegeben hat. Auf der Grundlage dieser Prämisse wachsen in der Bevölkerung die gesellschaftliche Angst einerseits sowie der Ruf nach der harten Hand. Andererseits werden immer drastischere staatliche und private Maßnahmen der Kriminalitätsbekämpfung legitimiert. Dieser Beitrag untersucht zunächst den costaricanischen Diskurs über alltägliche Kriminalität in historischer Perspektive. Darauf aufbauend wird argumentiert, dass einschneidende gesellschaftliche Veränderungen und ein Paradigmenwechsel in Sozial- und Wirtschaftspolitik seit den 1980er Jahren ausschlaggebend dafür sind, dass sich der Diskurs über Gewalt und Kriminalität gewandelt hat. Eine der wichtigsten Veränderungen liegt dabei in der Politisierung alltäglicher Kriminalität.

The Culture of Fear and Control in Costa Rica (II): The Talk of Crime and Social Changes

Sebastian Huhn

Article Outline

1 Introduction

Scarcely any other matter is such a heated topic of discussion among Costa Ricans today as violence and crime, their roots, their consequences, and legitimate ways to react to the problem.[1] Fear of crime is widespread in society, and the common perception that things aren't what they used to be prevails: the perception of the transformation of a formerly explicitly nonviolent nation into a battleground of social violence is generally accepted.[2] Upon this basis, the public proclamation of threatened peace or even of an end of peace in Costa Rica is

[1] I owe Nadine Haas, Diego Menestrey and Rosa Wagner a debt of gratitude for helping me to sort the mountain of sources which form the empirical basis of this paper.

[2] On the perception of crime and violence as one of the country's biggest problems see Huhn 2008a. On the perceived transformation of a former nonviolent nation to a violent one see Huhn 2008b and Huhn 2009a.

often proclaimed. One example of this is an influential nongovernmental organization by the name of Recuperemos la Paz (Recover Peace), which made the government sign a manifesto titled "Manifesto for the Recovery of Peace" in April 2008. This rhetoric strongly implies that a situation comparable to war already exists in Costa Rica due to violence and crime.[3] This imagined conflict has momentous consequences for the contemporary talk of crime. On the one hand, social acceptance of more repressive responses to crime has increased; on the other hand, the dimensions of the talk of crime are in turn fueling fear and panic in society. Both outcomes have a detrimental influence on politics, social order and the social contract and simultaneously detract attention from other social problems in Costa Rica. One statement from within the contemporary talk of crime may help to illustrate the general rage about crime in society as well as the new boundaries I am talking about. It was made by Mario Ugalde, sub-director of Costa Rica's most purchased newspaper, *La Extra*, in the editorial of the same paper in June 2008:

> The rapid growth of delinquency should be a priority topic in Costa Rica. […] Unfortunately, this series of crimes does not seem to cause a reaction among the Ticos, but rather demonstrates an incredible indifference. […] One of the key factors may be the generalized campaign of some "idiots," who consider all acts of defense against criminals a violation of human rights. I ask myself if these ill and cowardly minds who take the side of the criminals have not thought of the human rights of the fathers, sons, and brothers who have lost a loved one at the hands of these "devils." We are no longer in a pacifist country. Every day they attack and kill the citizens. In every family there is a victim. This is a no-man's-land, sorry, a land of the criminals. […] The strange pacifism of an important sector of society does not help anybody but the scamps and killers. […] If they do not reduce crime in Costa Rica, we will have to defend ourselves by all means necessary[4].
>
> (Ugalde 2008)[5]

Four declarations within this quote are characteristic of the current talk of crime. Firstly, it is undisputed by the majority of society that crime and violence have reached a degree which exceeds the limit of the tolerable and manageable. Secondly, and this is an important matter, this trend is perceived as having just emerged recently. In this context, thirdly, the fictional imagination that there was previously hardly any crime and violence and that Costa Rica used to be a calm and peaceful country prevails. This is an important element of the national self-perception.[6] Fourthly, the inconsistent demand to give up (inefficient and inappropriate)

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3 In Costa Rican public discourse the terms violence and crime are often used synonymously. If a differentiation is made, the term violence refers to violent crime, not to political violence as it would in other Latin American countries, such as Colombia.

4 All Spanish and German quotes are translated by the author.

5 I would like to thank Javier Llobet Rodríguez, who advised me of this article.

6 See also Huhn 2009a.

"national" peacefulness in order to recover exactly that—peace in the nation (as an integral element of Costa Rican national identity and social order)—is increasingly articulated and accepted. These four typical assumptions have been recurrent themes in the mass media and political statements. They were also very common in interviews I undertook in Costa Rica in 2006 with several people from very different strata of society about violence and crime (Huhn 2008a).

Ugalde states—and this is also typical of many synonymous statements—that the Costa Ricans are not appropriately outraged and therefore do not react strongly enough. This rhetoric seems to be common to those protagonists who want to further stir up the already vehement debate. From the very outset it takes the wind out of the sails of those who may indeed also realize a problem with crime but who as a matter of course do not demand the retraction of certain humanistic and social rules to solve the problem. Ugalde accuses those who warn of the consequences of more and more law and order or less human rights of not taking the problem seriously enough.

I do not wish to imply that fear of crime is purely an illusion or totally unjustified in Costa Rica. There is violence and crime, and everybody may be afraid for his/her individual safety or worried about the country's present situation, of course. Nevertheless, the phenomena are discussed and perceived not only as individual threats or as being among the many national problems but also as some of the most important social threats in contemporary Costa Rica.[7] Social order and the social contract are disputed, and the iron fist is increasingly demanded (Huhn 2008a: 22-24). The talk of crime is strongly mixed up with stereotypes and misconceptions and therefore stimulates panic, mistrust and xenophobia. Furthermore, the discourse is evident in very different parts of social life, that is, not only in conversations or texts but also materially: barbed wire-enclosed houses, and office buildings or fast-food restaurants guarded by armed security agents.

Against this background, I critically reflect upon two basic elements of the current talk of crime in this paper. I first show that neither the perceived problem of violence and crime nor the accusation that the state does not react adequately are new. On the basis of newspaper articles from the 1940s until today, I prove the historicity of the media coverage of a social topic which is perceived as historically nonexistent. I subsequently argue that the discussion of violence and crime—notwithstanding the accusations regarding the state's passivity—was not transmitted into national politics on the same scale until the mid-1980s. In conclusion, I briefly reflect upon the hypothesis that the historical change in the talk of crime has been a consequence of social changes in Costa Rican society since the 1980s. I suggest that fear of crime mixes with other social topics and perceptions which offer a more valid explanation for the specific character of the current social conflict regarding violence and crime than the

[7] Following Durkheim, crime is a problem not only for the individual but also for society as an imagined community, a social constellation that defines itself not least by imagining potential threats to its existence and the corresponding scapegoats (Durkheim 1977).

actual crime figures. As this hypothesis cannot (easily) be tested systematically, I concentrate on introducing and illustrating it to demonstrate its explanatory value.

In the following section, I will first present the most current analyses on violence and crime in Costa Rica to support the importance of my twofold perspective, which takes into account the historical point of view and that of the talk of crime. I will then outline the talk-of-crime concept in order to subsequently analyze the history of this discourse and its changing power over politics in the fourth and central section of this paper. I will also discuss the importance of social changes in Costa Rica as a catalyst for the transformation of the talk of crime. While social decline is often discussed as a reason for rising crime rates, I argue that it also has to be discussed as a reason for a changing view of crime by society.

2 Current Research

In the many monographs and anthologies about violence and crime in Latin America, Costa Rica is usually ignored or ‚not without cause, addressed as the nonviolent exception on the continent—even if some authors, such as Angelina Godoy, recognize the interestingness of the country, where crime rates are relatively low while fear of crime and the call for law and order are very evident (Godoy 2006: 63).[8] Nevertheless, most analyses concentrate on other countries. An interesting exception is “El cuerpo del delito” (“Corpus Delicti”) by Germán Rey, who does not analyze violence and crime per se, but rather their presentation in the mass media, and who includes Costa Rica as one of his cases (Rey 2005).

In most overview studies about violence and crime in Central America, Costa Rica is also usually referred to as the peaceful exception, with more detailed investigation seen as being unnecessary.[9] While this valuation cannot be dismissed completely—as there was and is more violence to investigate in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras—the catchphrase of the Central American exception has for a long time deflected attention from certain trends and changes concerning the talk of crime in Costa Rica. Together with some articles about the country (which I will present in the remainder of this section), our own work has filled this gap a little (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2007; 2008; 2009; Huhn/Peetz 2008; Huhn 2008a; 2008b; 2009a; 2009b; Oettler 2007; Peetz 2008a; 2008b).

Some recent works about violence and crime in Central America include Costa Rica, though they often tend to project Central American topics onto the country. One example is the growing number of studies about the Central American youth gangs, mostly referred to as *maras*. While most of these studies approach the problem of *maras* in an interesting way, by choosing an object of investigation which does not exist in Costa Rica in a comparable form,

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[8] Among the newer works about violence and crime on the Latin American continent, I refer to Briceño-León 2007; Dammert 2007; Rivera 2008; Kruijt 2006; Moser/Rodgers 2005; Moser/McIllwayne 2006; Kliksberg 2007.

[9] For example: Moser/Winton 2002.

they do not address the Costa Rican case properly.[10] In this case, Costa Rica really is an exception in Central America. With the exception of the works cited here, the talk of crime as a distinct subject has widely remained uninvestigated in studies on the region so far.[11]

Even if research by historians and social scientists on the topic of violence and crime in Costa Rica is rare, a few older works basically prove that these matters were already being discussed scientifically decades ago, and newer works demonstrate the way in which they are discussed today. In 1986 the sociologist Fernando Coto Martén published an essay about crime in Costa Rica. He basically criticized the loss of traditional values, the "anti-social" effects of watching television, and the lack of creative leisure-time facilities for the youth in Costa Rica. Therein he saw the roots for rising violence and crime. The article was written more than 20 years ago and the author even then focused on "new dimensions of criminality" (Coto 1986: 90) and the "alarming rise of criminality," at least since 1982, as his motivation (Coto 1986: 96). In 1988 Jorge Gonzalez and Alejandro Montealegre wrote their thesis about fear of crime in San José in order to graduate from the law faculty at the Universidad de Costa Rica. They stated that fear of crime had increased in the 1980s and that it might be linked to media coverage rather than to "real" crime rates (Gonzalez/Montealegre 1988).

Recently, Costa Rican social scientists and research institutions have published more works about violence and crime, particularly in Costa Rica. One work which has to be emphasized is the UNDP's *Informe Nacional de Desarrollo Humano 2005. Venciendo el temor. (In)seguridad ciudadana y desarrollo humano en Costa Rica* (*National Human Development Report 2005. Resolve Fear. Public (Un)Safety and Human Development in Costa Rica*) (PNUD 2006). The 600-page report deals with violence and crime in its five chapters, as well as with the social consequences, roots, and fear of crime. The report thereby deals very critically with the fear of crime and sensational fear mongering in Costa Rica. In conclusion, the report not only recognizes a serious crime problem in Costa Rica but also underlines the noncausality between crime rates, the spatiality of delinquency, and forms of crime on the one hand, and fear of crime and sensationalism on the other hand. It is one of the very few publications which acknowledge the talk of crime—even if the UNDP does not explicitly name it or investigate it and, in particular, does not take its discursive power seriously enough. Nevertheless, the report is so far the most important inventory on the topic, which it describes from many different points of view. Additionally, and not least, the fact that violence and crime was made the focus of the first National Report on Human Development itself proves the social significance of the topic in Costa Rica.

The report was published together with six additional reports (Cuadernos de Desarrollo Humano) on specific elements of the "crime problem." The first is a more general evaluation of crime and victimization as well as public perceptions and institutional measures concern-

[10] Fundación Arias 2006; Cruz 2006; Demoscopía 2007; Programa Estado de la Nación 2008a.

[11] Moser and McIlwaine (2004) have analyzed the public perception of violence and crime in Guatemala and Colombia, and Rodgers has emphasized the power of perception in his works on Nicaragua (2006a; 2006b; 2006c).

ing the topic (Rico 2006). In the second report, Ana Carcedo focuses on violence against women in Costa Rica (Carcedo 2006). As an empirical basis she analyzes two national opinion surveys on public safety and rightly criticizes the male point of view in the crime policies in her conclusions. In the third report, Karina Fonseca and Carlos Sandoval (2006) elaborate a very sophisticated analysis of the behavior of the Costa Rican mass media. They prove the causality of media sensationalism and fear of crime and criticize the lack of responsibility of the media. In the fourth report, Julio Bejarano (2006) attends to another specific element of the general "crime problem": drugs. He takes stock of the consumption of legal and illegal drugs and the public perception of the issue on the basis of the National Opinion Survey on Public Safety. The fifth report, which breaks ranks a little, describes the methodology of the UNDP in evaluating cantonal human development (Gutiérrez/Omodeo 2006). The sixth report discusses the economic costs of crime in Costa Rica (Chacón/Sauma 2006). With the exception of Fonseca/Sandoval and Bejarano, the well-elaborated and helpful reports nevertheless deal only marginally with the talk of crime, if at all.[12]

Recently, Sandoval et al. published an article and a book with a very different point of view from most studies about violence in Costa Rica. They investigate the perception of violence and crime from the angle of a marginalized community in the San José area. Their question is how stigmatized people from a suburb with real violence problems on the one hand and a very bad reputation on the other hand evaluate violence and crime in Costa Rica (Sandoval et al. 2007; 2008). Adrián Vergara directly addresses the talk of crime as a discursive construction in a recent article. On the basis of television coverage of violence and crime in the country, he argues that newscasts sensationalize violence and crime and generalize the perception of "victimness" (Vergara 2008).

Two articles by Rodolfo Calderón round out the current literature. Calderón focuses on nonviolent property crimes, because they are statistically by far the most important crime problem in Costa Rica, even if other crimes, such as homicides or muggings, are discussed more intensively. On the basis of social science and critical criminology, he argues that the crime problem is a consequence of neoliberal social change since the 1980s. He concludes that social exclusion and cultural inclusion trigger small property crimes like burglary or pickpocketing (Calderón 2006; 2008).

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[12] There are also several reports by other political foundations and think tanks about violence and crime in Costa Rica. The mostly very supportive investigations persist in taking a phenomenological point of view, which means that they are mostly based on the assumption that there is a big problem with crime and violence in Costa Rica without questioning this assumption itself. Therefore, they are only mentioned for the sake of completeness in the context of the central topic of my paper: Villasuso/Díaz/Chinchilla 2000; Programa Puentes de Luz 2008; Loría 2006; Solano 2007; Matul/Torres 2004; Barrantes 2006; Programa Estado de la Nación 2008b. Furthermore, Carvajal and Rivera (2001) have analyzed the perception of violence and crime in San José on the basis of a survey, and Sáenz (2006) has recently discussed Costa Rican homicide statistics from a socio-demographic point of view.

To summarize, alongside a number of articles which fall in with the talk of crime without reserve by emphasizing the extent of the problem in contemporary Costa Rica, there are some studies worth mentioning for their rationalization offing both the crime problem in Costa Rica and public discussion of it. In particular, the UNDP report treats the topic multidimensionally; Fonseca and Sandoval and Sandoval et al. highlight the media sensationalism as a problem in itself; Vergara argues from the point of view of critical discourse analysis, also to emphasize mass media sensationalism; and Calderón evidentially conceptualizes the crime problem and emphasizes that it is mainly a problem of small property crimes.
Nevertheless, the talk of crime itself has not yet been systematically analyzed. Most of the studies noted here interpret the fear of crime as a logical consequence of the crime problem, which they name as a very serious, extensive and threatening problem on the basis of a non-critical reading of crime statistics and public opinion polls (see also Huhn 2009b). Finally, the historical perspective is also widely ignored,[13] and the imagination of the crime problem as new and untypical in terms of national identity persists (see also Huhn 2008b and Huhn 2009a).

3 The Talk-of-Crime Concept

The central phenomenon of this article is often referred to as the "fear of crime." This concept is basically used to describe the individual fear of becoming a victim of crime. It is thus used mostly in statistical surveys and analysis as well as in psychological research on risk and differentiates between diffuse psychic fears, like the fear of darkness, and reasonable fears due to actual threats (for a review of the different uses of the concept see: Hale 1996; Farrall/Gray/Jackson 2007). Nevertheless, there are also many studies about the mediation of and manipulation of the fear of crime. Zedner, for example, points out that fear of becoming a victim is less common among young males than among other groups, although they are statistically the social group with the biggest risk of actually becoming a crime victim. As the feeling of vulnerability is far more prevalent among senior citizens, demography plays an important role in statistical research on the fear of crime (Hale 1996; Zedner 1997).
Other studies have shown that the number of people expressing fear of crime in surveys is generally much greater than the number of people who actually become victims of crime (Croall 1998) or that—at least in Great Britain—fear of crime is also more pronounced during

[13] Which does not apply to historical research on violence and crime themselves. In 1977, Lowell Gudmundson published an article about the socioeconomic aspects of crime in Costa Rica between 1725 and 1850 (Gudmundson 1977). Eduardo Madrigal analyzed delinquency in colonial Costa Rica (Madrigal 1996). In 1989, Naranjo and Solano published an article in the *Revista de Historia* in which they analyzed crimes against property in San José between 1870 and 1900 (Naranjo/Solano 1989). Francisco Alvarez analyzed homicides in San José between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the basis of sources in the Costa Rican National Archive (Alvarez 1996). Altogether, these remarkable investigations do not deal with the contemporary problem of delinquency or the talk of crime.

the winter months than in the summer (Semmens/Dillane/Ditton 2002). Certainly not all fear is without cause. Studies have also proven that rational anxiety in poor neighborhoods is often greater and that there often really is a higher risk of becoming a victim (Kinsey/Anderson 1992), while, simultaneously, many people also seem to get used to high crime rates, which in turn decreases the fear of crime again (Innes/Jones 2006). To summarize, many people are able to estimate threats of course, but the fear of crime is also very manipulable[14] and the mass media play an important role as scaremongers.

There is little doubt that the mass media in general play an important role in the shaping of public opinion (Matheson 2005: 1; Hall 2002). Firstly, by definition they reach many people. Secondly, they establish the "important" topics of society, as the agenda-setting theory has proved since the 1970s (McCombs/Shaw 1972; McCombs 2004). Thirdly, the mass media not only present these topics but also direct the public regarding how to think about them (Iyengar/Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991; see also van Dijk 1995a on power and the news media; Bourdieu 1998: 28; Cocco 2003: 57). And fourthly, through their discursive power, they are in many cases able to create consensus among a group or a majority—the majority of the Costa Rican nation in this case—as distinguished from other groups or minorities (Dijk 1995b; Noelle-Neumann 1998). Nevertheless, the fact that the mass media have a certain power to influence society does not necessarily mean that they do. In this paper, mass media are seen as only one of the driving forces of public discourses. For this reason I will also describe politics, and politicians, as another powerful force, to see if the topics of crime and violence have been treated similarly in this arena as well, which would indicate a dominant social discourse.

Thus, I do not refer to fear of crime on an individual but on a social level.[15] The topic of my investigation is not the rationality of fear but rather the social discourses that are the basis of and the consequence of the fear of crime. Caldeira (2000) establishes a different concept to describe the social (not the individual) and contextualized processes of feeling insecure in (modern) society: the "talk of crime". She defines the talk of crime as the everyday discourses about crime as a permanent threat—mediated in narratives, commentaries, conversations or even jokes—that "simultaneously make fear circulate and proliferate" (Caldeira 2000: 2). Her understanding of talk therefore corresponds to those processes defined as discourses in a Foucaultian sense. In this context, discourse does not mean discussion or deliberate and controlled negotiation, but describes the substructure of cognitive, cultural and political communication. Foucault himself defined discourse as a practice that systematically creates the subjects it talks about (Foucault 1981: 74). Thus, the main characteristics of the talk of crime are that it simplifies, generalizes, structures, and (co-)creates social reality (Caldeira 2000: 77). In short, the "talk-of-crime" concept does not mainly distinguish between rationality and

[14] For a detailed evaluation of the many different elements which influence the fear of crime see Farrall/Gray/Jackson 2007.

[15] For an evaluation of the concept of the fear of crime as a social instead of an individual phenomenon see Jackson 2004 and Farrel/Gray/Jackson 2007.

manipulation or ungrounded fear; rather, it underlines the power of public discourses as communicative contributions to a constructed insecure social reality.

On this theoretical basis, I will reconstruct the talk of crime in Costa Rican newspapers. One persistent belief in contemporary Costa Rica is that there has been a problem with violence and crime in Costa Rica for a few years now, and that there was previously no crime and violence worth mentioning. I will not argue on the basis of criticisms of the statistics here (as I have already done in Huhn 2008b and Huhn 2009b). The question is whether there was news coverage of crime and violence as a problem of national consequence during the whole second half of the twentieth century on the one hand and how the concrete phenomena were evaluated and contextualized on the other. With reference to the theoretical considerations on the discursive construction of social reality and social order (Berger/Luckmann 1969), the second question is who was considered the "We" and who the "Other," or respectively the "Good" and the "Bad," in dominant social discourses on violence and society in Costa Rica in the second half of the twentieth century. I will evaluate both questions using newspaper articles from the decades between 1940 and today.[16]

I will concentrate on *La Nación* for "its capacity for translating its symbolic power into the agenda of the public sphere" (Sandoval 2008: 107). Public opinion polls provide an informative basis regarding public perception of the quality of different newspapers and of newspapers compared to other media generally in contemporary Costa Rica. In an opinion poll in 2004, Costa Ricans were asked where they get information regarding the country's problems; 55.8 percent said they get their information mainly from television, 29 percent named newspapers, and 12.9 percent cited the radio (Sandoval 2008: 106). *La Nación* was named by 24.2 percent of all interviewees (28.3 percent in urban areas and 17.9 percent in rural areas). Of those interviewees, 10.6 percent, whose highest educational degree was primary school, identified *La Nación* as their favorite newspaper; 23.1 percent of all secondary school alumni and 52.6 percent of all university graduates did the same (Fonseca/Sandoval 2006: 10). *La Nación* is also the most important newspaper for all those who actively participate in Costa Rican politics and public discourses.[17] However, other national papers are also factored in here. I do not presume that the coverage on a certain topic in *La Nación* or in newspapers in general can be equated with the beliefs and opinions of all Costa Ricans. Nevertheless, newspaper articles are a mirror of the thinkable and sayable in society, as they have to be encoded within a cog-

[16] Here, I refer to articles I searched for on historical incidents, discussed in Huhn 2009a on the one hand and in the card indexes of the Biblioteca Nacional de Costa Rica (Costa Rican National Library) and the Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica (Costa Rican National Archive) on the other hand. It is assumed that the actual number of articles on violence and crime published in Costa Rican newspapers during the second half of the twentieth century is in fact much greater. Not every corresponding article was written during the historical incidents, nor were they indexed in the mentioned archives. However, a leafing through of all newspapers over the period was infeasible and unnecessary for answering the question posed in this article.

[17] See also Huhn 2009a on the justification of newspapers as sources for the reconstruction of dominant social discourses and for the limits of this source in twentieth-century Costa Rica.

nitive framework that readers can understand and decode (Hall 2001). As the nonhistoricity of the "crime problem" is one of the strongest elements fueling the talk of crime (besides the reference to doubtful statistics), I will reconstruct the discourse in detail. Afterwards, I will discuss certain contextual elements of the talk of crime in a less detailed manner in order to provide new perspectives with which to analyze the discourse.

4 The History of the Talk of Crime

On November 19, 2007, *La Nación* published an article entitled "La violencia en Costa Rica" ("Violence in Costa Rica") by the publicist Alfredo Sagot in its editorial section. In the article Sagot states that there is a problem with violence in Costa Rica that began 20 years previously. He lists different kinds of crime and mentions alcohol and drug abuse as well as the "modern" family (where mothers work instead of parenting their children) as major reasons for the problem he outlines, together with the (too) many migrants in the country, who have brought drugs, delinquency and prostitution to the thitherto "virgin terrain." For Sagot, the solution is self-defense, zero tolerance and denunciation: "We can't wait for the state to solve it" (*La Nación*, November 19, 2007).

Less xenophobically and with more humanistic arguments, the engineer Woodbridge wrote about the same problem in the same section of the same newspaper in February 2007, as did Lucila Monge, expert in penal law, in October 2004. "Costa Rica lives in a climate of rising violence today," Woodbridge stated (*La Nación*, February 1, 2007). Monge wrote about the oft-proclaimed "wave of violence"[18] (*La Nación*, October 25, 2004).

The tenor of the articles in *La Prensa Libre* is the same. In January 2008, assembly member Evita Arguedas wrote an opinion article titled "Tougher Punishments for Delinquents to Slow Down Insecurity." She also argued for zero tolerance regarding "the wave of crime that is affecting the country." Her article was based on a consistent "us and them" argument. She thus demanded "heavy-handed punishment and zero tolerance for *those*, who steal *our* peace" (*La Prensa Libre*, January 12, 2008). Also in an opinion article in *La Prensa Libre*, Luis Antonio Barrantes, assembly member for the right-wing Movimiento Libertario and president of the Congress Commission on Public Security, criticized the humanistic politics of the government, which, as he said, tries to fight crime by reducing poverty. Poverty has always existed and will continue to exist, he argued, and the government expects citizens to defend themselves. In his opinion, the first step in reducing crime would be the implementation of a rigorous immigration policy to prevent crime and the implementation of the *mano dura* (iron fist) to fight crime (*La Prensa Libre*, April 9, 2008).

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[18] An enduring metaphor to emphasize the danger, the vehemence, and the rapid increase of the problem (the same image is used for example in: *La Prensa Libre*, January 12, 2008; *La Nación*, October 25, 2004, *La Prensa Libre*, April 9, 2008).

In March 2009, Jaime Gutiérrez wrote another opinion article on the rising level of violence:

> Today, the criminals have "rights", but the rights of the victims are limited because self-defense, in some circumstances, has be abandoned as a right. […] The truth is that defense not is a right, it's a biological duty. They deny this duty to many people in the name of an obsession with "human rights," which have gone so far that the legitimacy of self-defense is questioned.
>
> (*La Nación*, March 7, 2009)

Even if there are many far more liberal and humanistic articles on violence and crime in contemporary Costa Rican newspapers, the articles cited here are—besides being representative of a widespread call for less tolerance—at least representative of three things. First, there is almost a consensus about crime being a big problem in the present as compared to the past. Secondly, the call for tougher punishment is widely accepted in society, as well as the idea that delinquents often get off too lightly, whereby the self-perception of peacefulness simultaneously persists. This overall paradigm shift is in turn sanctified by the latter argument. The authors would like to continue to be humanistic, as this is the Costa Rican way, but the rising level of violence obstructs makes this difficult. Thirdly, the argumentation often constructs a "We" in opposition to an "Other," the latter of which is often immigrants but can also include youths, drug and alcohol abusers, television (which shows violence) or just a vague mobster. In the following discussion I will trace these discourse fragments back into the past.

In the 1990s the perception of a high and rising level of violence was already an important topic in Costa Rican newspapers. In May 1994, the people of San José panicked due to the *chapulines*, a youth gang that committed crimes and was then clashing with the police. In the second half of April the topic had appeared on the front pages of the national newspapers. After a few days, *La Nación* had reported that the *chapulines* committed around fifty crimes every day (*La Nación*, April 29, 1994). In the first weeks of May there was virtually no day that the newspapers' front pages did not cover the youth gang. Soon they began talking about a war on the *chapulines* (*La República*, May 10, 1994; *La Prensa Libre*, May 11, 1994). It was argued that the police should take drastic action and that citizens should be allowed to do the same (*La Nación*, May 12, 1994). Articles also criticized Costa Rican law as being too slack in the war against the *chapulines* (*Diario Extra*, May 20, 1994). *La Prensa Libre* published an article on the legislative initiative of Victor Hugo Nuñez, assembly member for the Partido Agrario Nacional (National Agrarian Party). He suggested enforcing penalties against delinquent adolescents. His justification was the general "climate of total public insecurity," a statement that remained uncommented upon and unexplained in the article (*La Prensa Libre*, May 23, 1994). A few days earlier the same paper had published an article on the new director of the criminal investigation department. He declared the intensified fight against "delinquency that slashes the country in these moments" and "the delinquent wave" as a key in-

tention (*La Prensa Libre*, May 10, 1994). Eduardo Amador, editorials director of *La República*, said in the same month, "We Costa Ricans live in one of the most violent epochs which we have ever been confronted with." As reasons he named family disintegration, the presentation of violence on television, and the economic crisis (*La República*, May 20, 1994). While media coverage of crime is especially high during phases of moral panics—as was the case with the *chapulines* incident—it is most likely that the motifs of rising violence and uncertain times also appeared during other phases of the 1990s. The form of expression in the articles cited suggests that the idea of public insecurity and violence in society already existed—the lack of justification or explanation proves that the "crime problem" was already part of everyday knowledge.[19] None of the quotations contains reasoning about what is being declared. Finally, it remains only to say that all the authors cited had a high social status and can thus be considered socially accepted authorities. Their statements can be viewed as carrying weight in society.

The phenomenon of the sensationalization of violence and crime can be detected for the 1980s too. In September 1982, *La Prensa Libre* published an article about four violent crimes which all happened on one weekend. The headline read "Wave of Armed Assaults Rises" (*La Prensa Libre*, September 7, 1982). The four incidents were taken as a sign of a general increase in violence and insecurity. In May 1983, *La Nación* published an article with the title "Public Security" in its editorial section. The author, who criticized the government's failure to provide security, stated, "Nobody is safe, not at home nor in the streets." He suggested tougher punishment so that prisoners no longer felt "in prison like they are in a clubhouse while citizens feel like prisoners in their wired homes" (*La Nación*, May 5, 1983). Some days later, *La Nación* again published an article in which the author stated that the country was suffering from a "serious wave of delinquency." He named two different problems as essential: the spillover of the Nicaraguan Contra war onto Costa Rican soil and the poor equipment of police in the metropolitan area (*La Nación*, May 12, 1983). In July 1987, *La Nación* published an article about a speech by President Arias in its editorial section. One of the main problems Arias noted in the speech was the generally rising level of delinquency in Costa Rica (*La Nación*, July 25, 1987). A few months later, *La Nación* published another opinion article on crime in the country. The author complained about the number of crimes in Moravia, a district of San José, and criticized the government for not providing enough security (*La Nación*, October 14, 1987).

In the 1980s the argument about the "crime problem" or rising violence in society was also part of Costa Rica's consciousness or everyday knowledge. Generally, a very remarkable difference in many of the articles about violence, crime and insecurity in the 1980s from those articles in the 1990s was that they often spoke of Costa Rica's neighbor countries. Many authors named the crises in Central America as a key source of insecurity for Costa Rica (*La*

[19] By everyday knowledge, I mean widely accepted and therefore "valid" views, which are constructed in discourses which are dominant or hegemonic (Jäger 2004: 149).

Prensa Libre, July 10, 1986; *La Nación*, July 17, 1987). The other big perceived threat of the decade concerning violence and public insecurity was Communism (*La Prensa Libre*, October 1, 1987). In both contexts, Nicaraguan immigrants were portrayed as a threat concerning violence and crime in the country (*La Prensa Libre*, July 1, 1986). They were the main immigrant group and they came from the Sandinista Nicaragua; thus they were Communists and criminals.

An obvious and important difference in the news coverage of the 1980s compared to that of the following decades was also a lower frequency of articles generalizing and proclaiming the worst, as well as far less sensationalist language and far less graphic illustration.

As a great exception to its basic tenor, *La Nación* published a cover story with the headline "Costa Rica: Climate of Peace and Low Indices of Crime" in August 1975. The headline referred to the speech of a United Nations representative who had opened the office of the Instituto Latinoamericano de las Naciones Unidas para la Prevención del Delito y Tratamiento del Delincuente (ILANUD) (United Nations Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders) in San José the day before (*La Nación*, August 12, 1975). Nevertheless, the idea of the wave of violence also existed in the 1970s and it was much more common than the opposite perception, expressed in the above headline about the ILANUD opening. In October 1973, *La Nación* published an opinion article with the title "Impunity and Wave of Crime" (*La Nación*, October 26, 1973). The author argued that one only had to read the national papers to see how serious the problem of delinquency was. In February 1977, *La Nación* ran the headline, "We Create a Society in which Violence Reigns" (*La Nación*, February 20, 1977). On August 3, 1978, the paper published an article with the headline "Experts: They Index Grave Youth Delinquency." In August 1979, *Diario Uno* was headlined "Criminality Increases in Costa Rica" (*Diario Uno*, August 18, 1979). The author mentioned drug abuse, the morals of the youth, and the economic crisis as reasons for this increase. Rafael Herra, author of an opinion article in *La Nación*, also named violence on television as an important reason for rising crime in the same year. His example: *Kojack*, a US series first aired in 1973. In March 1976, *La Nación* published a commentary with the headline "The Crime Problem: Not One Step Forward." The author wrote about different fatal muggings during the week to reason that "the country has been experiencing a very worrisome and grave increase in its crime problem for quite some time" and that "the wave of crime is abnormally grave." He continued, "The inhabitants of the metropolitan area cannot sleep quietly; they cannot leave their houses alone; and they cannot abandon the bars to protect their windows, nor the alarms, nor weapons" (*La Nación*, March 2, 1976). Like several of the articles already cited, *La Nación* could reprint this column in its issue for tomorrow and nobody would guess that it was written 33 years ago.

Nevertheless, the news coverage of the 1970s was much more moderate in its language and in its illustrations than today. The topics were widely the same, however, though the Central American neighbors and especially the Nicaraguans were not yet perceived as a threat since the Sandinistas had not yet taken over. Still, the sense that crime and violence were a big social

problem and becoming worse than before already existed. As in later decades, authors generally proclaimed the existence of the problem without evidence. Single incidents—which often served as a story angle—were universalized as proof of a general trend. This trend was thereby proclaimed as new and unsettling, especially because the self-perception of being a civilized nation with a nonviolent identity had already existed for a long time and simultaneously played an important role in the evaluation of Costa Rica's own problems as well as those of other countries (Huhn 2008b and Huhn 2009a).

The tenor of newspaper coverage on violence and crime before the 1970s was different in many ways from that which followed. There are basically two reasons, among others, for this. Firstly, journalism was not yet that professional (Huhn 2009a) and, secondly, crime investigation was much less developed (Huhn 2009b). Therefore, crime was less visible to the public in general and, in particular, everything that happened in the country's periphery was often ignored in the media, all of which were produced in the central valley and especially in the capital.

Nevertheless, crime and violence did play a role in media coverage in the 1960s. In December 1966, *La Nación* published a full-page article with the headline "To Combat Crime Religious Education is Most Important". The author stated that there was rising crime in Costa Rica, and held the moral decline (of Christian morals) responsible for the problem (*La Nación*, December 10, 1966). On the next day, *La Nación* published a second article about the growing crime problem in Costa Rica. The author of this article wrote about population growth and economic problems in society as key reasons. While they differed in terms of reasons and prevention, both authors absolutely agreed about the phenomenon of rising delinquency itself without further justification. Most likely, they did not need to argue, because every reader already agreed with them. The rising crime problem once again appears to have already been common sense. *La Nación* also published articles about rising crime in Costa Rica on two successive days in July 1967. The headline of the first was "Delinquency is a National Emergency" (*La Nación*, July 19, 1967). The second one was titled "A National Emergency: The Rise of Delinquency" (*La Nación*, July 20, 1967). A few months later *La Nación* even stated that the problem had become so grave that the government and society had to treat it as the country's most important problem (*La Nación*, November 3, 1967). Also in November 1967, *La República* published an opinion article with the headline "A Country Nearly Defenseless against the Wave of Delinquency." The author stated, "The smuggling, the rising thieveries […], the homicides, the attacks against property, they cannot control this with words." He further mentioned drug trafficking as an important problem (*La República*, November 21, 1967). The author of an article published in *La Nación* in September 1969 agreed, with reference to the minister of security. The article was titled "We Have to Grow Strong to Fight against Delinquency Together" (*La Nación*, September 5, 1969). In November 1967, *La Nación* published another article about rising violence.

The author stated,

> In the face of the rising wave of delinquency that is being unleashed in the country, our society cannot maintain the passivity which it has demonstrated up to this moment, because even if we have written and talked very much about this grave problem, we still cannot diagnose anything good that has happened.
>
> (*La Nación*, November 7, 1967)

The author also mentioned that there were new and shocking forms of delinquency, and that the government was not undertaking enough to stop them. Finally he called the Costa Rican prisons paradises for the delinquents and suggested heavy labor (*La Nación*, November 7, 1967). Once again, the article repeated typical elements of the discourse: the grave problem and the weak policies of the government.

Compared to the following decades, media coverage on violence and crime in the 1950s was less prevalent. Nevertheless, even in this decade people wrote in Costa Rican newspapers about a crime problem. In June 1956, *Diario Nacional* published an article with the headline "The Grave Responsibility of Family Fathers and the Rise of Delinquency in Costa Rica." The article opens as follows:

> Against the background of the number of crimes, robberies, extortions, and a series of delinquent acts we observe day after day, Costa Rican citizens feel very worried. […]. Even if there are no adequate crime statistics, a simple look can prove, that the rise in delinquency is surpassing the growth of the population.
>
> (*Diario Nacional*, June 4, 1956)

The author cites the youth—especially the 16- to 21-year-olds—as a major source of delinquency and marijuana and alcohol abuse, and economic problems and moral decline as underlying causes (*Diario Nacional*, June 4, 1956). In June 1950, *Diario de Costa Rica* printed the argumentation of Congressman Luis Uribe Rodríguez, who explained a legislative initiative which the Congress passed the day before in order to strengthen law and order to the readers. As his motivation for introducing the bill, he cited the recent crimes in Costa Rica and their brutality. In his words, the country had been castigated by a wave of crime: "If the country wants social sanity, we have to duly confront the growth of national delinquency. […] If we allow things to go on as they are, we will lose the right to call this a civilized country" (*Diario de Costa Rica*, June 16, 1950).

Finally, I would like to cite two articles from the 1940s. In January 1948, Isaias Castro, referred to as an expert in criminal law, wrote an article for *La Prensa Libre* with the headline "Crime Continues its Path." He pointed to growing criminality in Costa Rica—acts such as robberies, homicides, and assaults—as evidence of social instability and argued that the number of these offences was increasing, even though he admitted that there were no statistics to prove his statement (*La Prensa Libre*, January 6, 1948). In January 1947, *La Prensa Libre*

published an article with the headline "The Delicts of Minors." The author stated that youth violence was rising, becoming more brutal, and urgently needed to be fought by the state (*La Prensa Libre*, January 21, 1947).

To summarize, the common knowledge (again in the sense of Jäger as discursively constructed) about rising crime and moral decline, about youth violence and drug abuse, and about the need to strengthen law and order already existed in the 1940s and 1950s. Once again, the number of articles on this topic was much lower than in following decades and the language was far more moderate. Illustrations to accompany articles were uncommon (which they were generally in this time). Nevertheless, the crime problem, which would be presented as something new and untypical for the Costa Rican society 60 years later, already existed—not as the idea of a few but rather as common sense, or as a institutional fact in the sense of Searle (1995). The problem existed not so much a fact per se, but mainly because society agreed on its existence. While violence and crime always exist as brute facts, their character as a problem, as increasing, as extensive, or as inopportune is a socially constructed institutional fact.

This section proves that the idea of a wave of violence and crime has always held sway among the Costa Rican public. Delinquency was part of the public agenda during the whole second half of the twentieth century (as it may also have been before), and the newspaper articles from this time share an important rhetoric: no argumentation is necessary regarding claims of rising delinquency because nobody would doubt them. Hall has established some fundamental considerations about the comprehension between author, text, and reader in his encoding/decoding model that can explain my assumption that the crime problem has been common-sense knowledge at least since the 1940s (and probably before). Following Hall, in writing a text, an author generally encodes information that has to be decoded by the reader. Since the decoding is far less individual or privatized than is often proclaimed, but is rather determined by the limits of the thinkable in society, the encoding has to follow corresponding rules. While author and reader do not necessarily agree totally about content and reading, encoding already determines the limits of decoding. These limits mark the dominant discourse. That is, a text can only be encoded and decoded according to acknowledged social discourses (Hall 2001: 172-174). As Hall notes on the topic of ideology, "ideological statements are made by individuals: but ideologies are not the product of individual consciousness or intention. Rather we formulate our intentions within ideology" (Hall 2002: 90). The consequent lack of argument to back up the proclaimed crime wave in the newspaper articles cited shows that the talk of crime already existed. If the proclamation of a crime wave were something extraordinary, the authors would have had to encode their texts differently for their readers to understand them. If there were only one text on the crime problem within a long period, it could have been the case that the author's opinion was exceptional and that he had simply encoded his text inscrutably by failing to argue his extraordinary point of view.

Yet it is particularly the number of articles on the "wave of crime and violence" which proves that they were the documentation of a lasting discourse.

Other discourse fragments, on the other hand, clearly point to a specific context in a certain moment and to the invention of certain realities. The image of the criminal Nicaraguan and the threat of Communism as part of the crime problem arose in the early 1980s in the context of the Sandinistas' victory in Nicaragua and the subsequent Contra war. While Nicaraguans were already perceived as being less civilized much earlier than this (Sandoval 2006: 155-179), this discourse was not yet linked to the discourse about the crime problem. Nevertheless, the history of the talk of crime proves that the perceived crime problem was by no means a new phenomenon.

Therefore, an ongoing discourse on rising violence as "the topic of the moment" can not only be demonstrated in Costa Rican newspaper coverage but can also be called dominant. While Costa Rican social and political life has changed a lot over the time period from the 1940s to the present, claims regarding the general increase in the problem as well as, surprisingly, some concrete discourse fragments have persisted. Youth as well as drug and alcohol abuse have been perceived as sources of violence for the entire time. Both are constantly referred to as signs of the moral decline of Costa Rican society. Another important discourse fragment that is permanently repeated is the sharp accusation against the state that it is inactive and weak. In this context, a fundamental change in the dominant discourse has been the changing role of politicians as speakers and protagonists over the time.

Every year on May 1, the Costa Rican president explains the government's policies and introduce future priorities in the parliament. These speeches provide a suitable source for analyzing the setting of political priorities in Costa Rica from a historical perspective. A look at these speeches proves once again—as do the newspaper articles discussed previously—that violence and crime have played a role in Costa Rican politics at least since the 1960s. For example, in 1967 President José Trejos cited citizen insecurity as an important national problem (Trejos 1967). These topics were also raised every now and then in the 1970s, and then a bit more frequently as of the mid-1980s (see for example Oduber 1976 or Arias 1987). Nevertheless, since the mid-1990s, violence, crime, and public insecurity have been emphasized in every speech, with only a very few exceptions.

Additionally, while prevention and humanity were emphasized until the 1990s, today suggesting the iron fist has become increasingly acceptable (see for example Pacheco 2004 or Arias 2007). While references to prevention and human rights used to be typical in passages about public insecurity in the speeches of the 1980s and 1990s (see for example Figueres 1996), since 2001 the tenor has changed essentially. In that year's May 1 speech, Rodríguez spoke of citizen's security as a national priority and stated that law and order would need to be strengthened and fundamentally reconceptualized, for instance, through the expansion of the community policing program adopted in 1998 (which basically means citizens monitoring and controlling one another), more police personnel, the extension of the country's prison

system, and the tightening of the law. He still mentioned prevention, but the general direction of action had changed. Rodríguez also used the catchphrase "recovering peace" for the first time (Rodríguez 2001). This later became a common phrase in the Costa Rican public discourse on crime, as if everybody would agree that Costa Rica was now at war. In his 2000 speech, violence, crime, and insecurity had not played an important role (Rodríguez 2000). Nevertheless, after 2001 they constantly did, and the tenor remained the same: the crime problem was presented as one of the country's biggest problems and the solutions were to be more police, stronger laws, surveillance, and tougher penalties (Rodríguez 2002; Pacheco 2003, 2005). While Pacheco highlighted his success in fighting crime in his 2005 speech and did not mention the topic in the following year (Pacheco 2004, 2005), since the inauguration of Arias in 2006 violence and crime have again been treated as major national problems (Arias 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009) and the first statements from the early campaigning for the 2010 presidential election suggest that it will continue to be a key issue. Once again this has to be highlighted as one of the most fundamental changes in the discourse: politicians have become prominent speakers in the talk of crime. The trigger for this change cannot be found in criminal statistics, nor in the fact that parts of society have blamed politicians for not taking action, something it has always said. The crime figures do not indicate any special anomaly in the last years of the 1990s or the first years of the twenty-first century (Huhn 2009b). The major change in the discourse has been caused by factors than a "crime wave" which threatens the country.

5 The Talk of Crime and Social Changes

If the talk of crime has existed at least during the whole history of the second Costa Rican republic and if crime rates do not serve to exclusively answer the question of why the problem is perceived in current Costa Rican public discourse about society as being much greater (Huhn 2009b), this suggests the need to look for changes in the context of the discourse. Several things have changed fundamentally in Costa Rican society since the 1980s that may help in understanding the specific contemporary talk of crime and its intensity. In this section I will argue that the context of the discourse may help to explain the talk of crime more conclusively than statistics. Therefore, I will first describe the fundamental social change in order to subsequently discuss its possible consequences for the talk of crime.

One basic change in Costa Rican society since the 1980s—and maybe the most fundamental one—has been the establishment of a new development model. In the mid-1980s the Costa Rican economy and administration began to change in the context of the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In the economic sector, traditional agrarian goods were increasingly phased out in favor of new export goods such as nontraditional agricultural and industrial products. The service sector was also stimulated, as in the case of tourism. The welfare state, which was the basic foundation of the

second republic's social order, was demolished in this context. The formerly protectionist state was increasingly liberalized. First, the banking system was privatized in the 1980s. Second, the social security system was cut back. While some fundamental public institutions remained in the hands of the state in the 1980s and 1990s, at the beginning of the twenty-first century the supporters of even more radical liberalization gained the upper hand (Vega 1996). In 2000 the Costa Rican government tried to privatize the state-owned Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE) (National Electricity Institute)—the national electricity and telecommunications supplier. A few weeks later they had to recall their act because of strong protests by Costa Rican society. From then on the public dispute about privatization and liberalization heated up in the country. In late 2007, Costa Rica adopted the Central American Free Trade Agreement between the United States, the Central American countries and the Dominican Republic following a referendum about its implementation in October 2007. The year prior to this decision was saw the most intense political dispute in the history of the second Costa Rican republic. Society was evenly divided between enemies and supporters of the agreement (Hoffmann 2008; Huhn/Löding 2007).

The changes to the Costa Rican development model and its fatal consequences for the welfare state also transformed the structure of Costa Rican society. The transition from the traditional economic focus to a nontraditional economy increased unemployment, underemployment, precarious labor conditions, and informal employment, and the wages in the formerly public and publicly supervised sectors decreased (Vega 1996: 132-133). As the social security system was weakened at the same time, living conditions for many parts of society changed for the worse, becoming much more precarious. Simultaneously, the country's middle class grew noticeably. As a whole new labor market for well-trained and well-educated employees emerged under the new development model, some Costa Ricans experienced social advancement as of the 1980s. As a result, social inequality accelerated. At the same time, insecurity among the new middle class increased as competition on the labor market deepened and the possibility of losing a job, and the corresponding social achievements, began to be a sword of Damocles. As Vega points out, this insecurity generally generated great pessimism and mistrust among all Costa Ricans (1996: 137).

The deepened social distinctions also had cultural consequences as of the 1980s. The increase of purchasing power among the new economic elite and the middle class led to a change in living conditions and consumption, which changed social interaction as well as visible distinction. Upper- and middle-class citizens began to be segregated not only economically but also spatially from the lower classes. Living in segregated and later gated communities became more and more common; the privatization of the economy therefore also lead to a privatization of public space. One of the most obvious examples of this is the many shopping

malls in contemporary Costa Rican cities, all of which have been built since the 1990s.[20] Spending time in the mall for shopping, eating, exercise at a fitness center, and as a side trip for one's leisure time became more and more popular. Whether intentional or not, spatial segregation was an important side effect. As spending time in the mall was expensive and as the private owners controlled access for their clients' best interest, the malls, as well as the gated communities and many other formerly public spaces in the country's cities, had and continue to have strictly limited access. Therefore, the upper and middle class often did not have to encounter members of the lower classes, either at work or during leisure time. The lower classes were not wanted or tolerated in the new world of the malls. the Costa Rican educational system also became increasingly segregated. While the state continuously cut spending in public schools and universities, private schools and universities offered high-quality education for those who could afford it (Vega 1996).

Finally, and also in the 1980s, an ultimate public enemy emerged in public discourse—this time not as a threat in terms of social classes or milieus, but as an enemy to the Costa Rican nation: the illegal Nicaraguan (and later also Columbian, Salvadorian, and Caribbean) immigrant. While there had always been Nicaraguan immigration to Costa Rica (Huhn 2005)—and while Nicaraguans had always been subject to the ascription of negative characteristics which would in turn emphasize the positive self-image of the Costa Rican nation (Huhn 2008b)—the discourse on immigration changed fundamentally in the 1980s. After the victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979, Nicaraguans began to be perceived as threatening in Costa Rica, which had a long and strong tradition of acrimonious anti-Communism (Huhn 2009). Furthermore, in the climate of rising social insecurity and competition, the immigrants—who also previously had been perceived as needy neighbors from a poorer and politically troubled country—increasingly became benefit scroungers in public discourse. The idea that this was no time for sharing began to gain the upper hand. In this climate, the first general immigration law was adopted in 1986. Under the law, what had formerly been irregular immigration was now declared illegal. As a result, many Nicaraguans became criminals by definition and a majority of Costa Ricans began to see a criminal in every Nicaraguan. In simple terms, discourse influenced law and law in turn affected discourse—a vicious circle which lead to outrage and xenophobia (see also Huhn 2005 and Sandoval 2006). In the context of this paper it is most important to note that first Nicaraguans and later also Columbians, Salvadorians, and people from the Caribbean were perceived as criminals per se (for potentially being illegal) and as delinquents, while statistics from this time period (such as the nationality of imprisoned persons in Costa Rican jails) disprove the perception that immigrants often committed crimes (Sandoval 2006: 277-286). Nevertheless, the image of the criminal immigrant—in which the idea of essential national identities plays a strong

[20] With the exception of the Centro Comercial Plaza del Sol ("Plaza del Sol" Commercial Center), which was built in 1983 and has a very different character from the malls of the 1990s as it is an aggregation of stores without the amusement elements like a huge fast-food corner, a cinema, or a playground that are typical today.

role—is said to be proven by the social reality in the immigrants' countries of origin, where violence is a daily occurrence.

So far, it can be said that as of the 1980s Costa Rica became a country (and with rising speed in the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century) in which poverty, social distinctions, social insecurity (among members of the lower and middle classes), new paradigms of consumption and ways of living, xenophobia, social and spatial segregation, and finally a strong and widespread pessimism about the country's future emerged and deepened. In this social climate, another very important social phenomenon appeared on the political and social agenda: corruption.

Costa Rica for a long time enjoyed the reputation of being a country with a political and economic elite which was rarely corrupt. Cases of corruption appeared only rarely on the political and public agenda. In the 1990s, the debate about corruption intensified. It reached a fever pitch in the autumn of 2004, when three former presidents of the republic were charged with corruption. On October 15, Miguel Ángel Rodríguez—president from 1998 to 2002 and at that time general secretary of the Organization of American States—was arrested at the national airport upon his return to Costa Rica. After a few weeks of house arrest and imprisonment he was provisionally released. Seven days later, Rafael Ángel Calderón—president from 1990 to 1994—was arrested after turning himself in. He was provisionally released in 2005 and is actually running for president with the Social-Christian Unity Party (PUSC). Finally, also in October 2004, José María Figuerez—president from 1994 to 1998 and at that time director of the World Economic Forum in Davos—was charged with corruption and requested to return to Costa Rica for the investigation, which he did not (Huhn 2006).

The ex-presidents obviously weren't the only persons involved. In addition to other members of the political and administrative elite, the new economic elite was particularly involved; they were members of the new privatized banks and foreign companies who tried to invest in the formerly state-owned and now increasingly liberalized infrastructure of the country. For instance, the French telecommunications company Alcatel had paid off Rodríguez and Figueres in order to prevail in the tendering procedure of the modernization of the Costa Rican mobile telecommunications network (Huhn 2006). These corruption scandals resulted in at least in three other social consequences. Firstly, corruption was investigated more often and also at a lower level of the administration—such as the public service, the police, and the judiciary—and many cases were discovered. Secondly, disappointment with and mistrust in these institutions grew in society as the whole state apparatus achieved the reputation of being corrupt. Thirdly, the national identity crisis intensified, as the Costa Ricans turned out to be far less honest than they had imagined themselves to be.[21]

To summarize, the social changes in Costa Rican society coincided with a loss of confidence in the political and economic elite as well as in the new development model they promul-

[21] On national identity in Costa Rica see Acuña, 1995 and 2002; Díaz, 2005; Molina, 2005. On corruption see Programa Estado de la Nación 2005: 301-322.

gated, which was linked not only to the promised increase in wealth and sustainable social development but also to social insecurity and a privileged elite which changed the whole social order for its very own interests. While the link between these new forms of social and economic fragmentation and the development of crime itself has begun to be investigated in the case of Costa Rica (Calderón 2006 and 2008), it is also essential to link these social processes to fear and to the talk of crime. In the following discussion I will highlight some central topics which should be further investigated in this context in order to understand and to "de-emotionalize" the Costa Rican talk of crime.

Several academic studies indicate that fear of crime can be an expression of general social anxiety. Taylor and Jamieson (1998) link high rates of fear of crime in the United Kingdom in the 1990s to the social decline in British society. They argue that social decline generated a general feeling of insecurity which—in the sense of Durkheim—was projected onto the topic of crime, as society can easily build social cohesion on the basis of outrage about crime and socially constructed groups of culprits (immigrants, ethnic groups, or the youth, for example). Dowds and Ahrendt (1995) have also argued that fear of crime in Great Britain has to be understood as an expression of social change and disintegration, as Jackson (2004 and 2006) also did on the basis of interviews in which he found a correlation between the fear of crime and perceived problems with social cohesion and living conditions. Furthermore, social scientists have argued that the fear of social decline often comes along with less tolerance for certain social phenomena, subsumed in the discourse as "anti-social behaviour" (Young 1999). Therefore, more and more social phenomena are perceived as deviant and therefore criminal behavior or a precursor to it. If a person defines more phenomena as crime, he experiences more crime as a logical consequence. A range of empirical investigations have demonstrated that signs of anti-social behavior or disorder less lead to crime (as the broken-windows theory implicated) than to fear of crime, as Maxfield (1987) shows in the case of graffiti, Burgess (1994) for garbage in public spaces, and Innes and Jones (2006) for youth hanging around in the streets. Finally, xenophobia intensifies the fear of crime (Garland 2001: 153).

These links between fear of crime, social decline, ruthlessness, and a xenophobic national discourse have all been identifiable in Costa Rica since the 1980s, and particularly in recent years; the general social processes are therefore comparable to those studied in other countries. More and more people fear losing their jobs, falling through the cracks, becoming poor in the future, and so on. Fear of crime and the blaming of scapegoats (such as immigrants) may be a consequence of these general anxieties. As I said previously, against the background of the talk-of-crime concept, the problem of fear in contemporary Costa Rica is even more complicated as it is then the result of a social discourse which is much more complex and much less subject to change through sporadic actions.

Firstly, the expansion of formerly public and now privatized spaces—such as gated communities, malls, and schools—logically depends on spatial segregation and the fear of "others," of gate-crashers who could intend to steal the new consumer goods like cars, computers, and

so on. Fear of crime among the middle class has physical manifestations, which in turn lead to the perpetuation of fear through the construction of a group of "others" (the potential intruders and the anti-social), a lack of communication with those "others," and increasing demonstrations that they are unwanted. Crime has been transformed from an occasional possibility to an institutionalized part of everyday life (Garland 2001: 153). As nearly every house, every public building (including schools and hospitals), and every car park in urban and suburban areas has iron fences, alarms, barbed wire, watchdogs, or other forms of private security, this latter observation applies to most of society. How can one not feel threatened all the time if he is reminded everywhere and around the clock of the existence of crime? Although the talk of crime existed before, the ubiquity of the fear of and outrage about crime has intensified (on these social processes see Caldeira 2000). Nevertheless, this observation certainly does not exclusively explain the changes in the talk of crime.

Secondly, the majority of Costa Ricans have lost confidence in the political elite and the state institutions and their capacities to solve the country's problems. Pessimism about the future and a simultaneous glorification of the country's past has started to dominate the talk of crime (Huhn 2008a and 2008b). Public opinion polls, such as the *Latinobarómetro*, indicate this lack of confidence. In the 2007 poll, only 34 percent of the interviewed Costa Ricans trusted their government; 42 percent had confidence in President Arias, which is also not very much considering that the Nobel Peace Prize laureate was a national hero in the 1980s and 1990s (*Latinobarómetro* 2007: 90). Even if the talk of crime already existed during the second half of the twentieth century, as well as accusations about state inaction, the legitimate disappointment with and lack of confidence in the political elite's ability to solve the perceived problem is helpful in understanding the change in the discourse. While powerful politicians were formerly able to becalm Costa Rican society by referring to the positive character of the Costa Rican social order, by underscoring the allegedly nonviolent character of the nation, and by implementing sensible policies, disappointment with and mistrust in the political elite now shoot these arguments down to a large extent. Furthermore, the mistrust in and the pessimism about administrative institutions—like the police or the courts—reinforces the perception that the state is not able to shelter its citizens.

Thirdly, fear of crime as well as social pessimism is today fueled by the Costa Rican mass media. As I have already discussed, the worry-generating media sensationalism (Fonseca/Sandoval 2006; Vergara 2008) puts a permanent spotlight on the most violent, unsettling, and disturbing crimes in the country and gives the impression that these cases are the rule and their frequency is "reality." The media therefore (co-)create a violent social reality in Costa Rica, which in turn powers the talk of crime. I have already mentioned that the media coverage on violence and crime has changed since the 1980s. While crime was a topic before, the degree of sensationalism has increased.

Fourthly, the talk of crime in its new form and intensity has become very strong not only in the media and in everyday life but also in politics, a third powerful arena. This fact has to be

emphasized as one major change in the talk of crime itself. While it existed before, it was not part of politics to the extent that it is now. The May 1 speeches of the Costa Rican presidents make this change very clear. These intentional statements of political priorities can be seen as a consequence of and simultaneously as a contribution to the talk of crime, as well as to the loss of confidence and the social changes in the country. They can also be viewed as strategy. Scheerer described the reciprocal relationship between media coverage of violence and crime and the state's policies to counteract it as a political-publicist circle of intensification (Scheerer 1978). The more the media publish stories on public insecurity, the more politicians react with law enforcement; reciprocally, the more politicians push the agenda of fighting violence and crime, the more the media cover these topics. Public security policies are therefore the other side of the coin of media coverage.

This argument can also easily be applied to the everyday talk of crime in society. As politicians must be elected by the citizens, they cannot easily ignore social anxieties and they can hardly advance views which are the absolute opposite of the mainstream perception in society, especially if they are confronted with a great mistrust in general.[22] Therefore, they may pick up the talk of crime and in turn fuel it, which perpetuates the talk of crime. Finally, citizens, journalists and politicians may, of course, honestly believe in the talk of crime as it is a subtle discourse instead of propaganda.

Nevertheless, it can be noted that the new political agenda, with its politicization of crime, detracts attention from other social issues in Costa Rican society. If a presidential candidate supports liberalization and cutbacks to the welfare state he can be elected, even if most prognoses indicate drawbacks for the majority of the population (as the election of Arias in 2006 has shown). In turn, it's highly unlikely today that a candidate can win by promising a more liberal legal system. Conversely, he can score by being tough on crime. On the basis of Simon's work on "governing through crime" (2007), violence and crime as a new political priority can also be related to the paradigm shift in politics and social order. Simon argues, citing the case of the United States, that crime has become a strategic issue in politics and that a large number of former social problems are now sold as criminal problems in politics and to the public (Simon 2007: 4). It would be worth applying this thesis empirically to the case of Costa Rica to find out whether the talk of crime operates to divert attention from self-generated social problems and as a new mechanism for governing society in the sense of Foucault's concept of governmentality. This would at least be an option for regaining power in a time in which the formerly protective and welfare-oriented state is giving up a great deal of its influence on society in favor of liberalization and decentralization, and in which the portrayal of social problems as crime problems also exculpates governments. The prioritization of fighting crime in the president's speeches can be interpreted as the politicization of crime in terms of Simon.

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[22] An argument Simon (2007: 69) discusses on the basis of the observation that it appears to have been impossible to be elected president in the United States since the 1980s if there were doubts about one's attitude to the death penalty.

6 Conclusion—Is Zero Tolerance Gaining Ground on False Premises?

The Costa Rican talk of crime has changed fundamentally in recent years. Important elements of this new talk of crime include the perceptions that everything used to be better, that the social situation contradicts the nature of the Costa Rican nation, and that radical actions are justified to safeguard social order and the nonviolent national identity. In the first part of this paper, I argued that Costa Rican crime statistics, the most cited source in the talk of crime, do not justify fear and panic without restriction. In contrast to the level of fear, crime rates have not exploded since the 1980s. In this paper I have demonstrated, on the basis of newspaper articles, that crime has always been a topic that generates pervasive feelings of insecurity and pessimism about society. This supports the argument against the common perception that things used to be better, in those times in which the Costa Ricans remained true to their natural identity. Nevertheless, on the basis of the president's annual reviews of national problems and priorities, I have also argued that this talk of crime was not systematically politicized until the mid-1990s. Finally, I have discussed the changes in the talk of crime, and especially in its social and political impacts, as being linked to a paradigm shift in social and economic policies and social order in Costa Rica since the 1980s.

The title of this paper is not stolen from David Garland and Jonathan Simon without cause. Simon has proven the linkages between a new development ideology and crime in the United States since the 1970s. He traces how conservatives from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan buried the New Deal by using crime and violence as a key argument against social welfare. The basis of their success was that society believed their evaluation of the New Deal, which—in their eyes—had created a generation of lazy social benefit scroungers who took drugs, did not have respect for authority, and (therefore) were criminal. The cutbacks to the welfare state were—as a consequence—justified as the necessary recovery of individual social responsibility for oneself and society, intended to fight crime and anti-social behavior and to re-establish law and order (Simon 2007). In Simon's eyes the result was a "culture of fear." Evans (1997) and Garland (2001: 97-98) view Margaret Thatcher's cutbacks in Great Britain similarly. The fact that she was the first British politician whose politics were based substantially on the fear of crime worked well for her new radical conservatism. Garland also traces the fundamental changes in law enforcement and social control. In the first part of this paper, I argued that the direction of contemporary Costa Rican law enforcement and social control has been heading in the same direction as Garland describes for the United States and Great Britain since the 1970s. Total surveillance of the public (by security cameras, for example) and of the private (by moralizing alcohol consumption as a security matter, for example) is one example; the call to be tough on crime is another, as is the social acceptance of controlling and denouncing each other (one concept of community policing). The result could be—in the words of Garland—a "culture of control."

The title of this paper therefore suggests that it might not be a coincidence that the politicization of crime in Costa Rica has accompanied the demolition of the welfare state, and that the

line of attack requiring such social control should be questioned. However, this argument can only be developed and empirically proven if it is not nipped in the bud by the spurious argument that crime *is* the biggest social problem in contemporary Costa Rica, that everything used to be better, and that everyone who disagrees with these statements supports violence and crime. Mario Ugalde's quote in the introduction highlights how emotional the debate about violence and crime in Costa Rica today is and how hard those who call for thoughtfulness in the debate are attacked.

As I finish this paper, the campaign for the 2010 presidential elections in Costa Rica has begun. At present, public opinion polls forecast the best chances for PLN candidate Laura Chinchilla, former vice president and minister of security. Violence and crime have always been a key topic in her political career as well as her earlier work as a specialist in citizen security. Hence, it is no surprise that these issues are playing a central role in the presidential campaign, and it is more than probable that the topic will be a future priority if Chinchilla wins the elections. What would then be the course of action in the coming years? Chinchilla has answered this question in her explanation of her first campaign pledge: zero impunity. Once elected, she promises the following:

> He who steals, assaults or murders ends up in prison and not on the streets again. We will reform the law and the required decisions to end impunity. We will send more police onto the streets, better trained and better equipped.
>
> (Chinchilla 2009)

As the Costa Rican neighbor countries increasingly accept their political and social failure by relying on the iron fist (as the election victory of Mauricio Funes in El Salvador indicates, as well as the citizen's statements I discussed in Huhn 2008a), zero tolerance is becoming ever more socially acceptable in Costa Rica and might become a key policy in the near future. It may sound a little heretical, but it is not all false to argue that it is not so much violence and crime but rather the new talk of crime that is a danger to the fundamental democratic consensus in contemporary Costa Rica.

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